

Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20554

In the Matter of

Telecommunications Relay
Services for Individuals with
Hearing and Speech Disabilities

CG Docket No. 08-15

Comment

Petition for Clarification Concerning the Provision of Internet-Protocol
Speech to Speech Relay Service (IP STS)

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I. Procedural History

On December 21, 2007, Hawk Relay filed a petition for clarification with the Federal Communications Commission (the Commission) for a ruling determining a new form of relay service, Internet Protocol Speech to Speech Relay Service (IP STS), to be considered a form of relay service under Section 225 and eligible for reimbursement. On April 7, 2008, the Commission published a public notice in the Federal Register seeking comment on the proposed new form of relay service with comments due on May 7 and reply comments due on May 22. With this filing, Speech Communication Assistance By Telephone, Inc. is submitting its comments on the questions listed in the notice.

II. Introduction

This filing will address the question of whether IP-STS falls within the definition of TRS as set forth in section 225(a)(3) of the Communications Act of 1934, 47 U.S.C. 225(a)(3)¹. In addition, this filing will briefly address the issue of jurisdictional separation of costs as brought forth in the public notice. Finally, the filing will conclude with several thoughts

¹ See Public Notice, *Petition for Clarification Concerning the Provision of Internet Protocol Speech to Speech Relay Service*, CG Docket 08-15, published in the Federal Register, April 7, 2008 (*Public Notice*).

on the per-minute reimbursement and the operational provision of this proposed new form of relay service.

III. IP-STS Qualifies as a Telecommunications Relay Service under Section 225(a)(3)

IP-STS represents a new variation in relay services. Originally, there was traditional TRS involving the use of TTYs. Other variations include the IP-Relay and IP-CapTel. At this time, STS Relay Service utilizes the analog telephone lines on PSTNs. IP-STS, in its proposed form, is basically the same service as STS, albeit using the Internet Protocol platform. Accordingly, IP-STS should be recognized as a service eligible for compensation from the TRS Fund.

IV. Jurisdictional Separation of Costs

IP STS should be compensated by the Interstate TRS Fund in its entirety until technological advances will allow for accurate identification of the origination of such IP-based calls. This is because, at this time, (as is the case for IP-Relay and Video Relay Service) it is not technologically feasible to identify the originating point of IP-based calls, and thus the

costs for its provision. Therefore, the existing jurisdictional separation of costs framework for the existing IP-based relay services should be applied to IP STS.

V. Per Minute Reimbursement Rate

It is Speech Communication Assistance by Telephone, Inc.'s position that the reimbursement rate for IP STS, if recognized as a service eligible for compensation from the Interstate TRS Fund, should be very large for several reasons.

First, for IP STS to be effective, the reimbursement rate must be high enough to give providers the incentive to identify and recruit users. Because the population is so small, the reimbursement rate will need to be extremely high, possibly higher than the VRS reimbursement rate.

Another justification for the high reimbursement rate is that poverty is extremely common in the STS-user population because of the low employment rate of people with speech disabilities (PSDs). A large percentage of PSDs had brain injuries from conditions like Cerebral Palsy. Such conditions cause additional disabilities which drastically lessen the likelihood of employment. Furthermore, rehabilitation statistics show that people with multiple disabilities are very hard to place in jobs.

Therefore, consumers will likely not use IP STS unless the providers are reimbursed for supplying computers and all other necessary equipment. Many people with speech disability (PSDs) have dexterity problems which require expensive equipment for computer access such as “eye gaze” access software and hardware or equipment to provide PC access through alternative and augmentative communications (AAC) devices. Accordingly, the Commission should reimburse the provider for all necessary equipment.

While for VRS, deaf consumers transferred telephone skills from previous relay experience, many new IP STS users will not have used the telephone before. Hence, learning to use IP STS will be a significant lifestyle change and will require up to ten home visits to enable consumers to internalize the social and psychological lifestyle changes that are necessary to use IP STS. As PSDs often have social and psychological barriers to telecommunications, combined with rampant poverty among PSDs, it is extremely unlikely that PSDs will use this service unless all equipment is provided along with 3-10 home visits to overcome social and psychological barriers. Qualified speech language pathologists (SLPs) should make these home visits. SLPs will spend much time identifying potential users, who are very hard to find. Generally,

SLPs charge in the neighborhood of \$100 per hour for their services and that cost must be built into the reimbursement rate.

VI. Operation of the Provision of IP STS

As the population size is so small, there should be only one national provider and one call center should serve the whole country. By having all CAs in one call center, they will be able to learn from each other. CAs should also be SLPs with specific training and experience deciphering the speech of PSDs. We say this in light of the fact that one reason for the current low STS call volumes is the lack of CAs ability to decipher the speech of many STS users.